

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF ALABAMA
NORTHERN DIVISION

TIMOTHY WOODS, #09369002

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Plaintiff,

*

v.

*

2:07-CV-855-MEF
(WO)

CHIEF BLACKMON OF THE
GEORGIANA POLICE STATION,
et al.,

*

*

Defendants.

*

RECOMMENDATION OF THE MAGISTRATE JUDGE

Plaintiff is incarcerated at the Montgomery City Jail. He files this 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action against Chief Blackmon and Officer Nelson with the Georgiana Police Department, Ms. Priscella with Cental Tel Telephone Company, GTE Telephone Company, and the Alabama Power Company. Plaintiff alleges that on June 26, 1994 Defendants Blackmon and Nelson along with other state and federal officials, whom Plaintiff accuses of being racist and members of the Klu Klux Klan, seized his truck, jeep, speakers, CD radio, amplifiers and CDs without probable cause. Plaintiff further alleges that the defendant utility companies overcharged him for telephone and power services. As relief, Plaintiff seeks the return of his property, damages, a refund for the overages on his utility bills, and his immediate release from prison. Upon review of the complaint, the court concludes that dismissal of this

case prior to service of process is appropriate under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B).¹

I. DISCUSSION

A. Claims Barred by the Statute of Limitations

Plaintiff complains that on June 26, 1994 Defendants Blackmon and Nelson, along with other state and federal officials, seized his truck, jeep, and assorted audio items and equipment without probable cause. It is clear from the face of the complaint that Plaintiff's challenges to the alleged illegal seizure of his property are barred by the statute of limitations applicable to actions filed by an inmate under 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

Federal courts must look to state law to determine, first, what statute of limitations is applicable, and second, whether that limitations period is tolled. *Whitson v. Baker*, 755 F.2d 1406, 1409 (11th Cir. 1985). Selection of a limitations period for § 1983 actions changed several times [between 1985 and 1989]. Alabama law, however, provides that the applicable limitations period is the one in effect when the claim is filed, not when the cause of action arose. *Tyson v. Johns Manville Sales Corp.*, 399 So.2d 263, 269-70 (Ala. 1981). It is undisputed that § 1983 claims were subject to a two year limitations period at that time. *See Jones v. Preuit & Mauldin*, 876 F.2d 1480, 1483-84 (11th Cir. 1989) (*Jones II*).

Dukes v. Smitherman, 32 F.3d 535, 537 (11th Cir. 1994). At the time Plaintiff filed the instant complaint, the applicable statute of limitations for actions brought under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 was two years. *Owens v. Okure*, 488 U.S. 235, 249-250 (1989)(the proper statute of

¹A prisoner who is allowed to proceed *in forma pauperis* in this court will have his complaint screened in accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). This screening procedure requires the court to dismiss a prisoner's civil action prior to service of process if it determines that the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary damages from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)-(iii).

limitations for § 1983 actions is the forum state's general or residual statute of limitations for personal injury actions); *see also Lufkin v. McCallum*, 956 F.2d 1104, 1105 (11th Cir. 1992). In Alabama, the general statute of limitations for personal injury actions is two years. *Ala. Code* § 6-2-38(1).

The alleged unconstitutional actions about which Plaintiff complains occurred on June 26, 1994. On May 17, 1996, the Alabama legislature rescinded that portion of the tolling provision which previously applied to convicted prisoners. *Ala. Code* § 6-2-8(a) (1975, as amended). The tolling provision of *Ala. Code* § 6-2-8(a) is therefore unavailing. Consequently, the applicable statute of limitations expired on the claims related to Plaintiff's June 26, 1994 alleged illegal seizure of property claim on June 26, 1996. Plaintiff filed the instant complaint on September 25, 2007. This filing occurred *after* the applicable periods of limitation had lapsed.

Unquestionably, the statute of limitations is usually a matter which may be raised as an affirmative defense. The court notes, however, that in an action proceeding under section 1983, it may consider, *sua sponte*, affirmative defenses that are apparent from the face of the complaint. *Clark v. Georgia Pardons and Parole Board*, 915 F.2d 636, 640 n.2 (11th Cir. 1990); *see also Ali v. Higgs*, 892 F.2d 438 (5th Cir. 1990). "[I]f the district court sees that an affirmative defense would defeat the action, a section 1915[(e)(2)(B)(i)] dismissal is allowed." *Clark*, 915 F.2d at 640. "The expiration of the statute of limitations is an affirmative defense the existence of which warrants dismissal as frivolous. *See Franklin* [*v.*

State of Oregon], 563 F. Supp. [1310] at 1330, 1332.” *Id.* at n.2.

In analyzing § 1983 cases, “the court is authorized to test the proceeding for frivolousness or maliciousness even before service of process or before the filing of the answer.” *Ali*, 892 F.2d at 440. “It necessarily follows that in the absence of ... defendants the ... court must evaluate the merit of the claim *sua sponte*.” *Id.*

An early determination of the merits of an IFP proceeding provides a significant benefit to courts (because it will allow them to use their scarce resources effectively and efficiently), to state officials (because it will free them from the burdens of frivolous and harassing litigation), and to prisoners (because courts will have the time, energy and inclination to give meritorious claims the attention they need and deserve). “We must take advantage of every tool in our judicial workshop.” *Spears [v. McCotter]*, 766 F.2d [179, 182 (5th Cir. 1985)].

Green v. McKaskle, 788 F.2d 1116, 1120 (5th Cir. 1986).

Based on the facts apparent from the face of the present complaint, Plaintiff has no legal basis on which to proceed with regard to those claims which occurred on June 26, 1994 as he filed this cause of action more than two (2) years after the violations which form the basis of those claims accrued. As previously determined, the statutory tolling provision provides no basis for relief. In light of the foregoing, the court concludes that Plaintiff’s challenges to the actions of Defendants Blackmon and Nelson with respect to matters which occurred on June 26, 1994 are barred by the applicable statute of limitations. These claims are, therefore, subject to dismissal as frivolous in accordance with the directives of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Clark v. Georgia Pardons and Parole Board*, 915 F.2d 636 (11th Cir. 1990); *see also Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989).

B. The Utility Companies

Plaintiff alleges that the Cental Tel Telephone Company, GTE Telephone Company, and the Alabama Power Company overcharged him on his telephone and electricity bills by tens of thousands of dollars. Plaintiff does not specify the date on which the alleged overcharges occurred. Assuming, *arguendo*, that the claims against these utility companies and/or their employees are not time-barred, they are subject to dismissal as frivolous.

Essential to sustaining an action under § 1983 are the presence of two elements. Specifically, a plaintiff must demonstrate that: (1) he suffered a deprivation of "rights, privileges or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws" of the United States; and (2) the act or omission causing the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988). Thus, to state a claim, a plaintiff must show a specific constitutional or federal guarantee safeguarding the interests that have been violated. *Paul v. Davis*, 424 U.S. 693, 697 (1976). Where no underlying constitutional right exists, a § 1983 claim will not lie. *Wideman v. Shallowford Community Hospital, Inc.*, 826 F.2d 1030, 1032 (11th Cir. 1987).

Here, Plaintiff's allegation that the defendant utility companies billed him in excess of the amount he claims he actually owes fails to allege infringement of any constitutional right to which he is entitled. Accordingly, the allegation is subject to dismissal as frivolous under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(i). *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989).

C. The Habeas Claim

Plaintiff makes repeated requests throughout his complaint that he be immediately released from prison. He alleges that he has been “put back in the Montgomery City Jail for nothing.” (*Doc. No. 1 at 5-6.*)

Where a prisoner is challenging the very fact or duration of his physical imprisonment and the relief sought is a determination that he is entitled to immediate release or a speedier release from that imprisonment, the inmate’s federal remedy is by way of a writ of habeas corpus. *See Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 500 (1973) (habeas corpus is the exclusive remedy for prisoners attacking the validity of their conviction or confinement). Plaintiff requests that he be immediately released from custody. When the effect of granting equitable relief under the civil rights statute would be to substitute a § 1983 action for a federal writ of habeas corpus challenging the basis for ongoing detention, a prisoner fails to state a claim under § 1983. *See Eutzy v. Tesar*, 880 F.2d 1010, 1011 (8th Cir. 1989); *Preiser*, 411 U.S. at 500. A plaintiff, therefore, cannot seek declaratory or injunctive relief relating to his confinement and/or conviction in a § 1983 action.² *See Edwards v. Balisok*, 520 U.S. 641, 648 (1997); *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477, 483-89 (1994); *Preiser*, 411 U.S. at 500; *St. Germaine v. Isenhower*, 98 F. Supp.2d 1366, 1373(S.D. Fla. 2000).

²Compensatory and punitive damages are available in a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action but not by way of a writ of habeas corpus. To recover damages for an allegedly unconstitutional confinement in a civil rights action, a plaintiff must prove that his conviction or sentence has been reversed on direct appeal, expunged by executive order, declared invalid by a state tribunal, or called into question by a federal court’s issuance of a writ of habeas corpus. *Heck*, 512 U.S. 486-87.

In light of the foregoing, the court concludes that Plaintiff's request for his immediate release from confinement is due to be dismissed without prejudice in accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

II. CONCLUSION

Accordingly, it is the RECOMMENDATION of the Magistrate Judge that:

1. Plaintiff's claims challenging events which occurred on June 26, 1994 be DISMISSED with prejudice pursuant to the directives of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) as Plaintiff failed to file the complaint with regard to these allegations within the time prescribed by the applicable period of limitation;

2. Plaintiff's § 1983 claims presented against Defendants Cental Tel Telephone Company, GTE Telephone Company, and the Alabama Power Company, to the extent they are not barred by the applicable statute of limitations, be DISMISSED with prejudice in accordance with the directives of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i);

3. Plaintiff's request for immediate release from confinement be DISMISSED without prejudice prior to service of process pursuant to the directives of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

It is further

ORDERED that the parties are DIRECTED to file any objections to the said Recommendation on or before **October 9, 2007**. Any objections filed must specifically identify the findings in the Magistrate Judge's Recommendation to which a party objects.

Frivolous, conclusive or general objections will not be considered by the District Court. The parties are advised that this Recommendation is not a final order of the court and, therefore, it is not appealable.

Failure to file written objections to the proposed findings and recommendations in the Magistrate Judge's report shall bar the party from a *de novo* determination by the District Court of issues covered in the report and shall bar the party from attacking on appeal factual findings in the report accepted or adopted by the District Court except upon grounds of plain error or manifest injustice. *Nettles v. Wainwright*, 677 F.2d 404 (5th Cir. 1982). *See Stein v. Reynolds Securities, Inc.*, 667 F.2d 33 (11th Cir. 1982). *See also Bonner v. City of Prichard*, 661 F.2d 1206 (11th Cir. 1981, *en banc*), adopting as binding precedent all of the decisions of the former Fifth Circuit handed down prior to the close of business on September 30, 1981.

Done this 26th day of September, 2007.

/s/ Wallace Capel, Jr.
WALLACE CAPEL, JR.
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE